

BIRTHDAY OF THE MODEL "T" FORD

ANNCR: IT'S NOT UNUSUAL IN THIS AUTOMOBILE AGE FOR PEOPLE TO HAVE A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR CAR... TO GIVE IT A NICKNAME, PERHAPS, AND TO LOOK ON ITS IDIOSYNCRASIES ALMOST AS THOUGH IT WERE A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY. BUT THERE'S ONE SPECIAL AUTOMOBILE THAT AROUSES FEELINGS OF AFFECTION AND NOSTALGIA IN THOUSANDS OF OLDER AMERICANS.

VOICE: VOA'S DON ANDERSON HAS THESE PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS... DRIVING IN TO THE STUDIO THIS MORNING, I SAW SOMETHING IN THE STREET, RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME, THAT ONE DOESN'T OFTEN SEE THESE DAYS -- A MODEL T FORD. AND THE THOUGHT OCCURRED TO ME THAT THIS YEAR REPRESENTS AN ANNIVERSARY THAT HAS GONE ALMOST UNNOTICED. IT WAS SEVENTY YEARS AGO -- IN 1908 -- THAT THE FIRST MODEL T ROLLED OUT OF THE FORD FACTORY AND INTO AMERICAN FOLKLORE.

ACTUALLY, THE LATE HENRY FORD BUILT HIS FIRST MOTORCAR BACK IN THE YEAR 1898. THEY WEREN'T CALLED "CARS" THEN, THEY WERE CALLED "HORSELESS CARRIAGES", AND THAT'S JUST WHAT THEY LOOKED LIKE. DURING THE NEXT TEN YEARS THE FORD COMPANY TURNED OUT SEVERAL OTHER CAR MODELS, BUT IT WAS THE MODEL T, STARTING IN 1908, THAT REALLY PUT THE UNITED STATES ON WHEELS.

DURING THE FOLLOWING NINETEEN YEARS, OVER FIFTEEN MILLION MODEL T'S ROLLED OUT OF THE FORD FACTORY, WITH ONLY MINOR IMPROVEMENTS OR CHANGES IN THE DESIGN. IN FACT, ONE MIGHT SAY THAT THE MODEL T WAS THE VOLKSWAGON OF ITS DAY. WITH

VOICE: THE MODEL T, HENRY FORD CREATED THE ASSEMBLY-LINE METHOD  
(CONT) OF MASS PRODUCTION, AND AS MORE AND MORE OF THE CARS WERE  
BUILT, THE PRICE DROPPED. THE FIRST ONES, IN 1908, SOLD FOR  
ABOUT EIGHT HUNDRED FIFTY DOLLARS, BUT BY THE TIME THE  
LAST MODEL T CAME OFF THE ASSEMBLY LINE IN 1927, THE PRICE  
WAS LESS THAN THREE HUNDRED FIFTY.

MODEL T FORDS ALL LOOKED ALIKE. ACCORDING TO LEGEND, HENRY  
FORD DECREED THAT A CUSTOMER COULD GET A MODEL T IN ANY  
COLOR HE LIKED, AS LONG AS IT WAS BLACK.

HEADLIGHTS ON THE FIRST MODEL T'S BURNED ACETELYNE GAS. THERE  
WAS A TANK-LIKE DEVICE BOLTED TO THE SIDE OF THE CAR, AND  
THE DRIVER TURNED A SCREW TO SET WATER DRIPPING INTO  
CHEMICALS WHICH GAVE OFF THE GAS; THEN THE DRIVER HAD TO  
RUN AROUND TO THE FRONT OF THE CAR TO LIGHT THE LAMPS.  
SO TURNING THE LIGHTS ON AT NIGHT WAS SOMETHING OF A  
CEREMONY.

LATER VERSIONS OF THE MODEL T HAD ELECTRIC LIGHTS WHICH  
RAN OFF THE MAGNETO, WHICH WAS A SORT OF GENERATOR BUILT  
INTO THE ENGINE AND WHICH ALSO FURNISHED THE ELECTRICITY  
TO FIRE THE SPARK PLUGS. THE AMOUNT OF LIGHT DEPENDED  
ON HOW FAST THE ENGINE WAS RUNNING; NORMALLY ONE HAD  
ENOUGH OF A GLOW TO TELL WHETHER OR NOT YOU WERE STILL ON  
THE ROAD. READING ROAD SIGNS WAS SOMETHING ELSE AGAIN!  
THE USUAL PROCEDURE WAS TO AIM THE CAR AT THE SIGN, STOP,  
TAKE IT OUT OF GEAR, AND THEN RACE THE ENGINE LIKE MAD,  
BRIGHTENING THE LIGHTS ENOUGH - YOU HOPED SO THAT YOU

VOICE: COULD READ THE SIGN AND DISCOVER YOU'D BEEN ON THE WRONG  
(CONT) ROAD FOR THE LAST TWENTY MILES.

REFUELING THE MODEL T WAS ALSO SOMETHING OF A CEREMONY,  
THE FUEL TANK WAS UNDER THE FRONT SEAT. TO FILL IT,  
EVERYONE GOT OUT AND REMOVED THE SEAT CUSHION, REVEALING  
THE TANK. EVERY MODEL T OWNER CARRIED A WOODEN RULER WHICH  
HE DIPPED INTO THE TANK TO MEASURE THE FUEL SUPPLY; FUEL  
GAUGES WERE STILL WAY IN THE FUTURE.

LATE IN THE MODEL T ERA, ELECTRIC STARTERS WERE AVAILABLE  
AS AN OPTIONAL ITEM. BUT WHEN I WAS A LITTLE BOY AND  
MODEL T'S WERE STILL A COMMON SIGHT ON THE STREETS, I  
CAN'T RECALL A SINGLE ONE WITH A STARTER THAT ACTUALLY  
WORKED! TO START A MODEL T ENGINE YOU WENT OUT  
FRONT AND TURNED IT OVER WITH A HAND CRANK. OFTEN THE  
ENGINE WOULD KICK BACK WHEN IT FIRST FIRED, LEAVING THE  
"CRANK-ER" WITH A BROKEN ARM. ARMS IN CASTS BECAME ALMOST  
AS COMMON AMONG MODEL T OWNERS AS BROKEN LEGS ARE AT SKI  
RESORTS.

IT WAS A DURABLE OLD CLUNKER, THE MODEL T. BY THE TIME  
IT WAS A FEW MONTHS OLD IT HAD USUALLY DEVELOPED A FRIGHTFUL  
RATTLE WHENEVER IT WAS IN MOTION, AND PARTS WERE ALWAYS  
DROPPING OFF; BUT SOMEHOW IT KEPT ON RUNNING. IF IT  
REFUSED TO START, IT COULD OFTEN BE PERSUADED BY A WELL-  
AIMED KICK, AND EVERY OWNER HAD HIS OWN PET REMEDIES FOR A  
BALKY ENGINE OR ANY OF THE OTHER MALADIES THAT SO OFTEN  
BESET THE MODEL T.

VOICE: IT'S BEEN OVER FIFTY YEARS SINCE THE LAST MODEL T WAS BUILT,  
(CONT) AND MOST OF THOSE FIFTEEN MILLION HAVE LONG SINCE RUSTED  
AWAY IN SCRAP HEAPS, BUT BELIEVE IT OR NOT, HUNDREDS ARE  
STILL RUNNING. YOU CAN STILL GET TIRES TO FIT THE OLD  
BEASTS; AND THERE ARE FIRMS, CATERING TO ANTIQUE CAR  
COLLECTORS, THAT STILL TURN OUT SPARE PARTS FOR THE  
MODEL T AND OTHER OLD CARS.

THESE DAYS ANY MODEL T FORD IS A VALUABLE ANTIQUE, AND  
ONE IN GOOD CONDITION, LIKE THE ONE I SAW THIS MORNING,  
IS WORTH MANY TIMES WHAT IT COST WHEN IT WAS BRAND NEW.

I ONCE OWNED A MODEL T FORD MYSELF, MANY YEARS AGO. I  
WISH I'D KEPT IT. COMPARED WITH THE CAR I DRIVE NOW, IT  
WAS NOISY, DRAFTY, UNCOMFORTABLE, TERRIBLY COLD, IN THE  
WINTER, AND NOT VERY FAST. BUT IT WAS A LOT MORE FUN!

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